



## The Caring Communities Program: The Literature Review

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The literature review is a critical element of the research process. An extensive review can reveal both the existing knowledge, and perhaps more importantly, the gaps in that knowledge and where your research will fit into an evolving set of research activities. It helps you explain the purpose of your activities to a wider audience.

### What is a Literature Review?

A literature review is an account of what has been published on a topic by accredited scholars and researchers. In writing the review your main purpose should be to convey to the reader what knowledge and ideas have been written about the topic, and what are their strengths and weaknesses. It is not just a descriptive list of material available or a set of summaries.

A literature review should do the following:

- Be organised around and related directly to the research question that you are developing,
- Synthesise results into a summary of what is and what is not known,
- Identify areas of controversy in the literature, and
- Formulate questions that need further research.

### Why do a literature review?

- To ensure that the area of research that you are interested in has not been completed before. This will guarantee that you are not simply unnecessarily repeating work - 'reinventing the wheel'.

- To highlight where the present research fits into the currently existing body of knowledge. A good review places a research project in a context and demonstrates its relevance by making connections to similar areas of research.
- To learn from previous thinking on the subject - this can help shape your own research and program planning. A comprehensive review will point out areas where prior studies agree, where they disagree, and where major questions remain.

### Some useful hints

Be sure at the beginning that you are aware of why you are conducting the literature review and what you are trying to find in the literature. This will influence what you are looking for in a particular article and what you do with it. It is also very important to select a research topic that is neither too broad nor too narrow.

Don't worry about missing that all-important article. You don't need to waste time and effort handling more literature than you need for your purpose. You will probably have a good idea of when you have collected enough information, but keep in mind the following principles:

- Review and analyse as you go - this will help focus your attention on the question at hand and whether or not you have answered it.
- Let the most relevant articles (according to your critical appraisal) guide you on what to read next and what to ignore.

## What should the review look like?

A good literature review should be organised around sections that present themes or trends, including relevant theory. It is not just a list of all material published, rather it should synthesise and evaluate the available literature according to the guiding concepts of your research question. In doing this it is a good idea to compare and contrast different authors on your particular research question and to group authors who draw similar conclusions.

The review should raise questions and identify areas to explore. It should also provide an idea of the work that has been carried out in the subject area, preparing the reader for the study that is to follow.

**NB - The wrong way to write a review is to list a series of research reports with a summary of the findings of each - this fails to communicate a sense of purpose of the review. List and group the findings in tables, usually in an appendix, that help to organise the bulk of the material reviewed. Then make sure the important findings still stand out.**

## How do I begin?

The first step towards a literature review is a comprehensive literature search. You

need to ensure that you are getting a wide range of the available literature within your research area. Keep in mind that the age of the material that you come across is relevant. It is often a good idea to start at the most recent research and then work backwards.

There are a number of different ways that you can start a literature search. The most up to date literature can be found published in scholarly journals and less often in books. Government documents and policy reports can also be useful in this regard. Journal articles can be found at your nearest University, hospital or college libraries. Once you find yourself at the library there are at least 4 ways to go about finding literature:

- Random perusal of relevant journals
- Subject catalogue
- Indexes and abstracts
- Computer searches in library databases

Probably the most common method of 'searching' for relevant literature is to use a computerised database such as Medline or the Social Science Citation Index (SSCI). These databases allow the researcher to organise their searches in several ways - by author, by article title, by subject or by keyword. Remember, when conducting your search that if you choose too few words or very narrow terms, you will miss a lot of relevant articles. Conversely, if you choose too many words or very broad terms, you will get a huge number of irrelevant articles.

It is also recommended that you search the bibliographies and the reference lists from the material that you have already found. This will guide you towards more articles in a similar subject area and will also provide you with a guideline on how

widely you have read about your research question.

Remember, your local librarian is professionally trained to conduct literature searches so if you have any questions they are well placed to answer them.

## How to Read a Journal Article

1. Read with a clear purpose or goal in mind - are you reading for basic knowledge or to apply it to a particular question?
2. Skim the article before reading it all - what can you learn from the title, abstract, summary and conclusion?
3. Consider your own stance on the issue - what is your bias towards the topic, the method, the publication source etc that may colour your reading.
4. Use your own knowledge and experience - what do you already know about the topic and the methods used? How credible is the publication source?
5. Evaluate as you read the article - what errors are present? Do the findings follow the data presented? Is the article consistent with assumptions of the approach it takes?
6. Summarise your findings and assess the factual accuracy of the findings and formulate questions about the article.

## Keeping track of your references

Accurate referencing skills are vital to your literature review as they help keep track of the material you have collated. It is a good idea to enter your references into a suitable referencing system (EndNote is probably the most common). It is also useful to list the material by

content area or to add keywords into the EndNote reference. This will help organise your references and facilitate any 'searches' that you do within your reference list. Most referencing systems generate a unique number to each entry for filing purposes. Write this number onto the journal article and file it away in numerical order.

## Remember...

You may or may not decide to conduct a literature review. However, if you have already completed one and would like to share it with other projects within the Caring Communities Program please e-mail it to:

[dfildes@uow.edu.au](mailto:dfildes@uow.edu.au)

On receipt of the review we will post it on our Caring Communities website. We expect that the reviews will evolve into a useful resource over time.

In fact, if you have recently read an article that may be useful to another project please do not keep to yourself. Feel free to send us the reference and we will make sure that it is available to others.

## Some Useful References

Neuman, WL 1997, Social research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Methods, Allyn and Bacon: Boston.

Hawe P, Degeling D and Hall J, 1990, "How to do a literature review" in Evaluating Health Promotion, MacLennan and Petty: Sydney.

Taylor D and Procter M, 2001. The Literature Review: A Few Tips on Conducting it.  
<http://www.utoronto.ca/writing/lirev.html>

